

Out of the Cradle

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The speeder bike bucked in protest, churning up mounds of black sand against the dune. "Thanks for the company, kid!" the rider yelled over the shrieking engines. Drake Paulsen stepped away from the stranger, shaking black soot from his clothing and hair. Gritty, sand-encrusted fingers wiped at his flight goggles, erasing stubborn soot from the lens.

"Thanks for the ride!" Drake shouted back, scurrying up the face of the dune. He pulled the sand-saturated rag from his face, refreshed by the cool air blowing gently against his skin. Glancing over his shoulder, he listened, then hollered. "They'll be here any minute."

The nomad revved the supercharged engine, spinning the steering bar as he gunned the throttle. The bike swerved uncontrollably, kicking up sand and debris as the vehicle accelerated over the parched flatland. Drake scampered up the dune, his lithe frame accustomed to the loose earth shifting between his fingers. Near the summit, breathless, he threw himself into the sand bed, turning to catch a glimpse of the nomad's shadow before it vanished between the desert swells.

The word *socorro* was Old Corellian for scorched earth. Drake could think of no name better suited to described his birthworld. From pole to pole, the blackened crests of hardened volcanic ash covered the planet. In the distance, the Rym mountain range stood in silent testament of the long dead volcanoes that laid the ash.

Sighing, Drake leaned into the dune, resting his head against the sand. He heard the distinct whine of the approaching hunters, mounted on greatly overpriced, grossly undermodified desert bikes. Confident, the young Socorran waved at them, smiling when they paused indecisively, their figures wavering unsteadily in the thermal fumes rising from the desert floor. For a moment, Drake worried that they might come after him and, unconsciously, he thumbed the restraint from his sporting blaster, feeling the familiar heel against his palm. There was no price on his head and there was little to be gained from a 15-year-old boy who unwittingly managed to catch a ride with a known galactic felon. Drake heard himself sigh when the bounty hunters finally moved on, heading back into the Doaba Badlands after more profitable game.

Nestled in the womb of his homeworld, Drake pushed the goggles back against an unruly length of brown hair. Absently, he fingered the golden hoop at his left lobe, his blue eyes struggling in the glare of Socorro's waning sun. The thin mask of desert soot could not hide the handsome, bronze face, nor the smirk of satisfaction that crossed his lips. Abruptly, the first cold breeze swept in from the badlands. Drake tugged at the leather cord about his neck, rolling the small pouch between his fingers. Reluctantly, he pulled himself from the embrace of the sand, stretching his stiffening joints before making his way to the top of the ridge.

Soco-Jarel space station was alive and animated with the incoming and outgoing traffic of heavy transports and planet skippers. Muffled by the deep sands, Drake could feel the power generators buried beneath the ground and hear the voices of technicians, droids, and machinery, even as the wind carried the shrill whine of a faulty ion drive to his ears. Carefully navigating the unsteady crest of the dune, Drake paused, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, as he cast a final glimpse at the storm clouds moving in across the horizon.

Oblivious to the natural wonders of this world, Soco-Jarel extended far into the desert for several kilometers, using external hangars and flight pads to welcome freighters and transports from across the galaxy. The northern entrance was only a few meters away from the threshold of the planetary capital, Vakeyya, the only recognized city on the face of the planet.

"Kaine?"



Pulled from his reverie, Drake started down the ridge. Using the hardened creases blasted into the rock by freighter exhaust and firing rockets, he slid down the final slope. He deliberately kept the glare of the sun just over his right shoulder, an old nomadic superstition for good luck. "It's just me, Toob," Drake replied, grasping the steady hand.

"I heard rumors about your old man coming back," the aging freighter captain said. Then eyeing the sporting blaster at the younger man's hip, he added, "Running kind of light, aren't you?"

Easily disguising his horror with embarrassment, Drake smiled into the Corellian's scarred face. The surgeons left a smooth patch of yellowed scar tissue where the backdraft from a homemade thermal detonator had blown away Toob's left eye. They replaced the other eye with a cybernetic unit, which fit poorly into the sagging, damaged socket. Drake remembered that a would-be bounty hunter booby-trapped a warehouse bulkhead with the faulty explosive that ruined Toob's face, injured another man, and left seven others dead, including the bounty hunter. The injuries were nearly a month old, and yet they appeared as recent as a few days. "Dad says I'm not ready for a heavy blaster," Drake confessed, gratefully staring away from Toob's face.

"If you can hold it and shoot it, then you're old enough." Toob sighed. "Galaxy ain't safe no more, not even here in Vakeyya," he grumbled, a sound that Drake could only define as defeat. "It's like I always said, there's two kinds of life on Socorro, predators ..."

"And bigger, smarter, faster predators," Drake finished.

Toob grinned wryly. It was an honest effort against the thick scar tissue covering his face. "Spoken like a true rogue." Noticing the pouch at Drake's chest, he opened it and poured the contents into his gloved hand, smiling over the childhood relics: a baby tooth, a ring made from the broken stem of an ion coil, and a mummified lizard claw. "I'm going away for a while, Drake," Toob said, replacing the items, "to rest up." He hesitated, then added, "If you or your father ever need a place ... look me up on Vedis IV."

"I'll tell him," Drake replied, staring into the smuggler's eye. "Clear skies, Toob."

Toob stooped, drawing lines in the earth at Drake's feet. Cupping a small mound of sand in his hand, he poured it into the leather pouch, pulling the cord to seal the top. "Always remember where you came from, boy. It's one thing nobody can take from you." Silently, he brushed past Drake, walking in the direction of the lower docking bay.

Drake forced a breath into his lungs, feeling a tremendous weight settle over him. He watched the old man's back, realizing from words and deeds that Toob was going away to die, offworld, as was expected. No one died on Socorro. It was taboo to even speak of the dead, who were not really dead but "offworld on business." Despite this and other bizarre traditions, Socorrans felt an immeasurable sense of cultural pride. Beneath the darkening sky, Drake could only feel pity.

The young Socorran shrugged against the infinitesimal weight of the sand. Patiently, he waited to see Toob's ship, the *Glory*, dust off from the station, her ion drive whistling into the upper atmosphere. As he watched, the light freighter seemed to vaporize, swallowed whole by incoming storm clouds. Drake absently pulled at his earring, untangling the gold hoop from his curls. Silently, he made his way through the familiar shadows of the city to the Black Dust Tavern.

"Well, I'll be a baby rancor's teething ball!" a voice cried from the back of the tavern. "Lom! When did you jet in?"

Drake shrugged off the insult of his childhood nickname. A few of the tavern patrons, native and offworld, nodded to him. Respectfully, he returned the silent gesture, stepping up to the bar.

"By all the moons of Nal Hutta, boy!" the salty pirate swore, moving toward him.



Drake grinned, desperately trying to focus his eyes on the venerable face of Karl Ancher, his father's oldest partner and friend. He tried to ignore the peculiar limp in Ancher's gait, a stride too painful for the young Socorran to watch. Ancher was the other survivor of the homemade detonator, which left the aging smuggler with a few months to contemplate his notorious occupation and a cybernetic leg implant.

"How are you, Lom?" he chanted musically. Deftly swinging a mug onto the counter, he poured a generous portion of Socorran raava into it.

"I set down a few hours ago," Drake replied, taking a sip. The rich brown liquid was sweet with an unexpected bite. He winced as the bitter raava burned going down his throat.

"How's your pop?"

"Fine, but the *Miss Chance* is having hydraulic trouble again," Drake croaked, hoarse from the raava. "He's bringing her into the station for repairs."

"Whatever happened with that fancy Ghtroc that your dad swore he'd own?" Ancher winked with mischief. "Even if he had to steal it."

"The *Steadfast*?" Drake grinned wickedly. "Well hidden," he whispered. "Somewhere in the Doaba Badlands."

The old Corellian's eyes glazed with pride. "Somewhere in the Doaba Badlands," he grumbled, "where only a water beetle could find her."

Behind the bar, among a menagerie of holographic pictures and fixed imprints, Drake saw a holographic etching of his father, standing beside his mentors, Karl and Toob.

Needing only his smuggler's sense to follow Drake's eyes, Ancher whispered. "Guess, you met Toob on the way to the station."

Drake nodded without comment, staring into the glossy reflection.

"Lom," Ancher sighed, leaning against the counter. "I hope you never learn the lessons that me and old Toob had to. I taught your daddy the tricks that I taught myself. The same tricks he's teaching you. All with the hope that you won't end up like Toob, all broken up and scared inside."

Drake shrugged. "That'll never happen to me, Ancher."

The patriarchal Corellian did not return the sly grin. "Some wounds run deep, Lom, deeper than even a Socorran pirate's heart."

Drake heard the tavern door open. The usual bar noise and banter of patrons fell suddenly mute. There was a long pause as footsteps echoed inside the front room and then the door closed. Casually glancing over his shoulder, Drake saw, though not clearly in the dimness, three unfamiliar figures. Anxious, he thumbed the restraint over his blaster, taking his cues from the more experienced Ancher.

"Watch your back, kid," Ancher whispered. "Some of your daddy's distant relations are coming."

On Socorro, there was no such thing as an enemy, only "distant relations." Born into the smuggling tradition, Drake was familiar with the obscure underground of his birthworld and the shadows that never seemed to fade. One of those reoccurring figures was a Sluissi, Secles Uslopos, who worked as councilor to one of Socorro's more feared overlords, Abdi-Badawzi. Humanoid from the waist up, a deep purple tunic draped the narrow shoulders of the Sluissi. Below this, his serpent body seemed to remold itself over and over as he slithered into

the tavern, promptly followed by two gruff and disorderly Gamorreans.

Folding his hands before him, as if in prayer, the Sluissi raised himself up on his tail, weaving hypnotically side to side and hissing in a low voice.

"What do you mean don't be alarmed?"



Ancher spat.

Drake stared at the Corellian and then at the Sluissi, realizing that Ancher's angry statement was in response to the alien.

Unflinching, Secles hissed, "Greetingsss friend Ancher and young Paulsssen, I am pleasssed the rumorsss we have heard prove true." Extending his arms to each side, he gushed, "You and your father have returned, triumphantly, to Sssocorro. Welcome. Welcome home."

"What's it to you, leather head?" Ancher spat, casually setting a blaster rifle on the bar.

The Sluissi hesitated, as if contemplating the insult. The Gamorreans behind him began grunting with intense agitation. Their brown and pink snouts glistened with mucous, complementing the drool swinging from their jowls. Secles softly hissed, "I am here on behalf of the honorable Abdi-Badawzi."

Drake frowned. "And what does Abdi want?"

The Sluissi blushed, a pink flush radiating in the pale pigment behind his head. "The Magnificent One hasss asskeds for the great Chu'la and hisss ssson to grant him one sssmall favor, for which each ssshall be well compensssated."

"No," Drake said curtly, turning back to the bar.

"Abdi-Badawzi wasss quite ssspecific," the Sluissi hissed. The hood at the back of his head quivered nervously. "You would refussse to pay ressspect to your father'sss mentor and only benefactor?"

"I would," Drake replied, drinking the rest of his raava.

"You heard the boy!" Ancher quickly snapped. "Scratch gravel, leather head."

The Sluissi fumbled in the front panels of his robes. The action, though slow and deliberate, set Drake on the edge. He drew his blaster in one swift, swinging motion, bringing the muzzle a meter from the Sluissi's face. Steady in his grip, Drake stared into the alien's face, aware of the seething Gamorreans about to surround him.

"Do it and I'll blast your choobies all across the back wall," Ancher snapped from behind the blaster rifle.

"My pardonsss." Graciously, the Sluissi bowed in submission, calmly removing a package from his robes. "Abdi-Badawzi offersss thisss payment, 1,500 creditsss for your pressence alone, young Paulsssen. Two thousssand for your father, Chu'la, to appear."

Ancher was impressed with the offer, but previous experience with the deceptive34e Twi'lek gangster had his smuggler's sense trumpeting with alarm. "Lom?" he whispered, sighting the largest of the Gamorrean through his scope.

"I said no," Drake replied.

Ancher cleared his throat, then growled, "Take your money and your musssscle," he glared at the Gamorreans as he mocked the Sluissi's accent, "and get out of my bar."

Without further argument, the Sluissi bowed and waved the Gamorreans to follow him through the door. As they retreated, Drake noted an arsenal of illegal weapons and anxious triggers beneath the tables. Several of the tavern patrons sighed, visibly relieved to see the Sluissi and the Gamorreans leave.

"Back for a few hours and Badawzi is already trying to add you and your dad to his collection of burnouts." Ancher shook his head, replacing the blaster rifle under the bar. "You better watch your back, kid. Badawzi usually gets what he wants."

"I better go," Drake sighed, drinking the last of the raava.

"Remember what I said," Ancher scolded. "Watch your back."

Pausing to check for a clear path to the docking hangar, Drake turned to the old Corellian and smiled. "Take care, Ancher." He vanished into the night outside the tavern door.

Burdensome clouds moved in from the deep desert, threatening the skies above Vakeyya with rain, rain that in nearly a millennium had not fallen. The search beacons illuminated a clear kilometer-high ceiling above the spaceport. Drake paused to stare at the swaying, hypnotic routine of the lights. They reminded him of the intruding Sluissi in the bar. Shivering against the cold, he felt an abrupt, odd sensation of numbness traveling throughout his limbs. Before his eyes, the docking bay lights shifted and wavered, spiraling in the sporadic pattern of hyperspace.

Horried, Drake recognized the effects of a blaster's slow stun setting. He fought desperately to resist the paralyzing force. The Black Dust Tavern was only a few meters to the side of him. He tried to call out against his unseen attacker, but was instantly cut off by a hand gripping him about the neck. The young Socorran dropped to his knees, a deliberate position of surrender; but the hand did not release him, even as he gasped for air. He passed out.

Drake awoke to a dull ache inside his head. Moaning, he craned his neck against the pillows to temporarily relieve the pressure of pinched nerves. He recalled his last vague memories of the Gamorreans dragging him into a nearby alley and choking him unconscious. His next recollection was of Secles staring anxiously into his face, checking his dilated pupils for life. Though he barely understood Gamorrean, there must have been a brief argument about Abdi-Badawzi's wrath if the son of Chu'la were permanently injured. Next, with vivid clarity, Drake remembered the main throne room of Abdi-Badawzi's underground fortress, where dazed and stunned, he had fallen to his knees before Badawzi's throne and into his father's arms.

Drake sat bolt upright. The action was so sudden that he doubled over immediately, overcome with dizziness and nausea. He struggled from the bed and collapsed to the floor. Cool sweat dried against his skin as he propped himself against the bed frame, unable to distinguish where the effects of the stun ended and where the physical abuse began. Barely conscious, he glanced about the room, recognizing the compartment. Early in his life, while his father smuggled for Badawzi, Drake had come to think of this particular, much neglected place as home. There was even a box of toys left behind in a corner where he last remembered them -- wooden blaster rifles and pistols, blackened with soaps and dyes, now graying with dust mites and age. Cobwebs ran intricate patterns through freighter ship models, complete with smuggling plates and hidden sentry guns. Drake examined a crude model of a YT-1300 freighter, shaking the smuggling plate loose. A cache of Socorran credits fell into his hand. Under the waning Republic, the money was as valueless as the sand beneath his feet.

Staring about the room, as if lost in a strange place, he was again only five standard years old. For one stale, dusty moment Drake imagined that his father might suddenly burst through the door, showering him with trinkets stolen from the latest smuggling venture.

Leaning against the bulkhead for support, Drake tried the keypad, surprised to find the hatch unlocked. Cautiously, he peered into the outer hallway. His blaster and holster were missing, leaving him vulnerable; regardless, he continued into the corridor. Unerringly, he stumbled through the winding tunnels and into the main chamber of Badawzi's fortress, led by a faint buzzing sound. Standing at the base of two gigantic metal doors, Drake pressed his ear against the cold surface. The buzz was no louder, but he was certain the noise was coming from the opposite side. Quickly glancing about the tunnel, he noticed no other doors. Reluctantly, he punched the keypad.

Noise blasted from the inner chamber as Drake found himself suddenly immersed in a large congregation of aliens, humanoid and otherwise, representing nearly every sector of the galaxy. Not since leaving Abdi-Badawzi's underworld monarchy had he been among such a diverse cross-section of felons and criminals. The spacious chamber echoed with the babble of various alien dialects, most of which were familiar to him. Others seemed to echo in the hollow memories of his childhood, memories that were haunted by the mortal specter sitting in the far corner of the room -- Abdi-Badawzi.

Offworlders claimed there were few people, few things, truly born on the shadowy face of Socorro. To gaze upon the bizarre character of Abdi-Badawzi was to believe that no other planet was capable of producing such a rare sun. The Twi'lek dressed in thick dark robes, which flowed from the high collar at his neck to the floor. His rich black skin glistened with sweat, lightly scenting the air about him with the smell of freshly toiled earth. Wrapped about the base of his large skull, his tentacles twitched casually, as subtle as an after-thought.

"Ssilence!" cried Secles. In homage, the Sluissi's body was stretched to its full length, pressed to the floor before the Twi'lek's throne. "Ssilence!" he screeched.

The crowded room went instantly silent, a multitude of alien optic orbs and eyes turning to the throne. In a synchronized wave, they fell to their knees, their massive combined shadows seeming to retreat from the presence seated before them, leaving Drake closer to the throne than he expected. Badawzi laughed. It was a sinister sound, even to his senses. His tentacles twitched slightly, uncurling from his bulbous head.



The Sluissi straightened, nodding to the underworld lord. Turning to Drake, he raised himself up on his tail, swaying pompously side to side. "The most honored and beloved Abdi-Badawzi is pleased ..."

"I understood him," Drake snapped. His voice was clear and even, reverberating through the quiet chamber. Though few ever mastered the intricacies of the Twi'lek silent language, he was probably one of the few who could interpret the subtle shifts and movements of the Twi'lek's appendages. The young Socorran's mastery of language acquisition was an asset to his father and at one time a novelty among Badawzi's court. "What do you want, Abdi?"

"Is this how you greet the most cherished friend of your good father?" Abdi questioned in perfect Socorran, feigning injury.

Drake replied, "Distant relations should stay distant." He paused. "To avoid bad blood."

"If there is any *patchuk* between us, young Paulsen," Abdi began, using the Old Corellian word for animosity, "it was unintended."

"Then why am I here?"

Abdi-Badawzi inclined his head to the side, caressing his gaunt cheeks. "Your manners are appalling, even for a pirate."

Under his breath, Drake swore the worst of Socorran oaths. "Abdi, what ..."

"What do I want?" The Twi'lek rose from his throne, a monarch's scepter falling to the floor before him. Secles quickly slithered beneath it, catching the red crystal rod in his coils. Badawzi stared at the scepter and then at the groveling Sluissi. Moving away from the raised platform, he stepped on them both.

"Thank you, merciful massster," Secles grunted.

Ignoring the Sluissi, Badawzi said, "I want to grant you the wish of a lifetime, young Paulsen, a chance to outshine your father, the great Chu'la, and ..."

"No!"

"And possibly save his life." Malevolently, Badawzi nodded to his Gamorrean bodyguards. Momentarily leaving the chamber, they returned carrying the writhing figure of Kaine Paulsen between them.

Bound and gagged, Kaine struggled against the rope restraining his hands behind his back. It took three Gamorreans to hold the 35-year-old Socorran pirate in one place. His handsome face flushed with his efforts, but he hesitated upon seeing Drake. His eyes went directly to Badawzi. Alarmed at the bruises on his son's throat, Kaine began his struggles anew and managed to kick one of the Gamorreans in the face.

"No need to fear, Chu'la. Your only child has always been safe within my walls." Badawzi smiled, showing rows of sharp teeth.

Staring into his father's anxious eyes, Drake whispered, "Just say what you want, Abdi."

"Safe delivery of a small cargo."

"Where?"

"The location isn't important to you."

Drake scowled. "And the cargo?"

"You needn't concern yourself."

"Then what am I doing here?" Drake snapped.

Abdi grinned, a visible pleasure spreading across his ominous features. "You will be the decoy."

"No!" came the muffled reply from Kaine. The Gamorreans regrouped to control his flailing body. "Drake!" His long brown hair was disheveled and loose from the band. His handsome face flushed with unadulterated fury.

Glaring across the room at Badawzi, Drake whispered, "What are the terms?"

"Then it's agreed," the Twi'lek declared, offering his hand for the Socorran to kiss in homage to seal the pact.

"Don't expect me to be part of your fantasy, Badawzi." Drake crossed his arms over his chest, impatiently waiting for the details.

Abdi-Badawzi stared down his nose at the insulting young pirate, his frown immediate and his wrath obvious. "Halbert!" he shouted.

A towering monstrosity of a man shuffled from the shadows, groveling at Badawzi's feet. "Yes, exalted one." His voice seemed a whisper, forced to travel from some great depth within the 2.5 meter frame. Matted black hair hung listlessly down the Corellian's back; shorter lengths grew from all angles on top of his abnormally large head. The stale scent of Gamorrean beer followed the smuggler's every motion, wafting into the air when he moved. Drake groaned, recognizing the signs of a burnout long overdue for disaster. Staring at the bloated body, he was amazed that such a big man could cower so low to the whims of a Twi'lek's ego.

"You've complained about needing another pilot," Badawzi sighed, yawning. "Now you have one, try and manage not to blow him up like you killed the last one."

"Of course, Abdi-Badawzi, Magnificent Abdi-Bad ..." Halbert's voice was cut off when the scepter slammed into the base of his skull.

"Silence!" Badawzi spat. "I grow weary of losing freighters to your incompetence, Halbert. I think this time I'll send someone to keep a watchful eye on you. Parr'Sratt, my freighter, the *Seldom Different*, is prepped in the departure bay. Make certain that it returns to Socorro in one piece."

Standing apart from the other patrons of Badawzi's court, a Coynite warrior walked toward the Twi'lek monarch, bowing in respect.

"Tracc'sorr, Ag'Tra'Abdi-Badawzi," he swore in a smooth, even voice.

"Nothing must interfere with my shipment to the Nodgra system," Badawzi said, returning to his throne.

"Al'ha'gra," Parr'Sratt acknowledged, forcing Halbert to stand.

Awed, Drake swept his eyes over the 2.8 meter frame, fully armored in ceremonial gear. The razor edge of the coyn'skar, a pole-arm combination axe from the Coyn homeworld, stood at his side, the shaft elaborately carved with runic symbols of valor. Soft, downy brown fur covered a noble but haunted face, blanketing a raised brow ridge and a dignified snout. A raven black mane tied in an intricate series of braids and knots framed gray eyes. Drake had spent a lifetime among the stars, seeing the marvels and mysteries of the galaxy. This Coynite was unlike anything the young Socorran had ever seen and the sight of the alien warrior brought a new, profound feeling of fear.

Alarmed, he turned to his father, only to find Kaine's eyes gazing directly into his. The older Paulsen turned slightly, showing his hands, still bound behind his back. His fingers moved slowly, methodically.

Nodgra system ... at least three days in hyperspace ... don't worry ... you will be safe.

Though the young Socorran was unsure of his father's plans, a sense of confidence swept through him. There was some unseen game being played out and Drake was not sure what or who was involved. He stepped away as the Coynite dragged the semi-conscious Corellian toward the hangar bays on the lower level. Hesitant, Drake paused, staring after his father, who was still detained by the Gamorreans. Abruptly, Parr'Sratt broke the silent gaze between father and son, herding the younger Paulsen into the corridor.

Two days later, Drake was still haunted by the coerced separation from his father. In the solitude of the lower gun turret beneath the freighter, he sighed, resting his head against the gunner's support chair. Alone in the cradle of the ship, he stared through the viewport, watching the wild spiralling lights of the vortex of hyperspace. Massaging his forehead and temples, Drake felt relieved to have this quiet moment. Since coming aboard the *Seldom Different*, Halbert was a looming specter over every action and word. Life under the abuse of Abdi-Badawzi, numerous other bosses, and a lackluster career built on failure had left an edge in Halbert. An edge that pushed him beyond simple disillusionment to the border of psychotic dementia. It was certain, especially in sober moments, that Captain Elias Halbert wished the Socorran harm and was only waiting for the right opportunity to loose his caged violence on the nearest scapegoat. There was no way for him to lash out at the Coynite, not without serious and obvious repercussions, which left Drake as the only avenue for his aggression.



Drake hoped a peaceful journey in hyperspace might ease the tensions between them. It might have worked had it not been for a Jawa hidden aboard the freighter, who began tampering with the ship's systems, sabotaging everything from the air condition units to the waste facilities. Drake found evidence of the stowaway -- hidden food stores, unexplainable stockpiles of tools and equipment, even a discarded robe. But nothing convinced Halbert until the Corellian went to use the facilities and the unit malfunctioned, flooding Halbert and the crews' quarters with raw sewage.

Abruptly, the threads of light beyond the viewport began to retract, becoming the telltale points of stars and planets. Without warning, the *Seldom Different* dropped into realspace. Startled, Drake slammed into the firing controls as the freighter bucked and lurched through the untimely transition. Lying dazed on the deck plates, Drake gasped, his bruised lungs struggling for air. Almost immediately, the proximity alarms began to blare.

"Paulsen!" Halbert's harsh voice crackled across the intercom. "Get up here! Fast!"

Breathless, Drake struggled to his feet. In the corridor, he heard the raucous Corellian swearing a steady succession of insults and curses. Rushing into the forward cabin, the urgency of Halbert's voice and the reason for the Corellian's distress became quite clear. Through the viewport hovered an Imperial Star Destroyer, blocking their path. For Drake, it was his first, up-close view of the Imperial menace sweeping through the galaxy. Sixteen hundred meters of gun turrets and docking bays, laser cannons and shield generators, the enormous battle fortress was an inspirational abomination of advanced technology. Staring over Halbert's shoulder, Drake read the data screens, determining that through accident or intent, the Star Destroyer crossed their hyperdrive coordinates, tripping the deactivation safety built into the drive system.

Halbert turned away from the flight controls, a malevolent mask of fury apparent in his face. "Sit!" he spat, pointing to the navigator's chair just opposite and behind him. Obediently, Drake sat down and was silent.

"Unidentified YT-1300, this is the *Inquisitor*," came the broadcast over the internal speaker. "We are reading your signature as the *Seldom Different*. Stop and prepare to be boarded."

Halbert's face blanched. "Boarded?" he hissed. Then over the comm, he said, "Confirmed, *Inquisitor*. This is the *Seldom Different*. We were on route when our hyperdrive detected you crossing our coordinate plane." His voice was steady beneath the strain. "If you don't mind, we'll reset and be on our way."

"Negative, *Seldom Different*," came the firm reply. "Any attempt to leave this area will be viewed as an act of aggression."

"He's powering up portside turrets," Drake whispered, reading the sensor screens. "And there are at least a dozen smaller ships moving toward us, fast."

The Coynite mumbled a brief comment, checking his own sensor screens.

Halbert groaned. "TIE fighters."

Resigned, Drake leaned into the acceleration chair, feeling the rapid canter of his heart. "Unless the Empire has been granting heavy weapon permits, it might be a good idea to hide any blasters."

Halbert bolted up from his chair, frantically unbuckling his blaster belt. "Hide everything!" he shouted, close to panic. "There's a bandoleer of power packs in that cabinet. Get rid of them too!"

Drake jumped at the order, unmoved by the harshness of Halbert's voice. He sprinted out of the forward cabin, taking the power packs with him, singly motivated by the implications of Imperial law, which frowned severely on illegal weaponry among its citizens.

Like his father, Drake was fond of the YT-1300 freighter and had spent much of his childhood wandering through the conduits and ventilation shafts of such ships. Though the models tended to change with each new improvement, the maintenance ducts and tunnels remained the same. Crawling through a narrow hatch, Drake removed the ceiling plate and scrambled inside the shaft. The stench from the backed up waste disposal system was overwhelming and he gagged, coughing on the fumes. Through tearing eyes, he found the object he was searching for, a built-in tool bassinet, where engine mechanics often stored contaminated tools. Recalling an old smuggling trick from Ancher, he tripped the shield housing around the box. If the boarding party brought a scanner aboard, the sealed box would deflect any probe, permitting a clear reading.

"They're sending a shuttle, kid," Halbert shouted over the intercom. "Make it quick!"

"Done," Drake replied, jumping down from the vent and replacing the panel.

"Get down into the cradle and stay put!"

Drake hurried to the entrance of the gun pit. Sliding down the ladder, he listened as the sound of the pressurized hatch in the rear of the freighter began to open. Leaning against the interior wall, he listened to the pace of Halbert footsteps as the Corellian hurried to meet the boarding party.

Curious about their Imperial guests, Drake risked a quick glance out of the turret chute. "Stormtroopers," he whispered. He saw seven of the Imperial soldiers, their immaculate white and black trimmed armor glaring in the harsh interior lights of the corridor. Among them, a gray-suited officer arrogantly straightened his shoulders. It was difficult to maintain a cold and calculating pose, considering the Corellian stood taller than the officer and most of the stormtroopers.

"Look, Lieutenant Taggert, we have no cargo," Halbert said, feigning a mused Imperial citizen.

As they spoke, Drake watched in horror as several more stormtroopers descended the boarding ladder. "I can't believe this," he whispered in defeat.

Abruptly, one of the stormtroopers spotted him and charged toward the pit. "Halt!"

"Wait!" Halbert screamed defiantly. Drake was surprised at the courage in his voice. "He's just a kid," Drake heard the Corellian explaining to the disgruntled officer, who accused him of hiding criminals aboard ship. "I told him to wait this out in the lower turret. You know how kids get in the way, asking questions and mouthing off."

Drake smiled, genuinely impressed with the smuggler's performance. He clearly interpreted Halbert's warning to stay in the turret like he was told and kept quiet. When the stormtrooper descended into the pit to investigate, he found Drake sitting in the gunner's chair, staring into space.

"This is 37," the stormtrooper reported. "I've got the boy in the lower turret."

"Confirm, 37," came the reply. "I have another one in the bridge. The ship's clear."

Drake had never seen an Imperial stormtrooper in the flesh. He found himself fascinated by the lore that surrounded the Galactic Empire's specially trained fighters. Unestablished rumors claimed that they were more machine than human, nameless except for an identification number. According to the nomads of Socorro, who were fond of testing their mettle under extreme ordeals, the stormtroopers were subjected to excruciating chemical torture to remove all the hair from their bodies.

Drake shivered with the thought, involuntarily turning to stare at the stormtrooper, who was ready to meet his inquisitive eyes.

"Problem?" the stormtrooper demanded, the muzzle of his blast rifle level with Drake's chest.

Drake averted his eyes immediately, cursing himself. "No, sir."

"Who asked you to speak?" the stormtrooper spat, driving the rifle into the boy's chest. Deftly, he brought the butt of the rifle across Drake's chin, knocking the young Socorran from the gunner's chair. "I think you'd better come with me."

Sullen, Drake rose to his feet, wiping blood from his nose and chin. Eyes narrow with suspicion and injury, he realized that he was in no position to argue with an Imperial-issue blast rifle. He climbed to the top deck and waited for the stormtrooper to follow him.

"Hands on your head, scum!"

Drake did as he was told and walked into the forward corridor, which led to the bridge. The muzzle of the blast rifle felt wedged against his spine, but he did not resist.

"What happened?" Lieutenant Taggert demanded, letting the date registries and ship's logs fall to the floor. His skin was pale, nearly gray, a thin set of lips blending into the ignoble angle of his chin. Propping his hands and arms behind his back, the Imperial officer drew his thin frame into a straight line.

"On a bantha's hairy ... what'd you do?" Halbert snapped, desperately trying to sort and compile the scattered datapads on the floor. Behind him, two stormtroopers held the Coynite at gunpoint.

Drake stared defiantly at Halbert, then at the Imperial officer. "I looked at him." By the frightened expression that crossed Halbert's face, he quickly realized the venom in his words. Abruptly, he felt the rifle against the back of his knees. Startled, he collapsed.

"Is this true?" Taggert asked. "You struck him for looking at you?"

"No, sir," the stormtrooper replied. "I was forced to strike him when he pulled a weapon."

"What?" Drake cried.

"Weapon?" Halbert screamed, tearing at his matted hair.

"Silence!" Taggert demanded. "What weapon?"

"In the turret, sir. I removed him from the area before he could regain the weapon and fire on me."

"Where is the weapon?"

"Here, sir," replied another stormtrooper. "After 37 removed the prisoner, I retrieved it from the turret." He gave the blaster to the officer.

Taggert sighed, pursing his thin lips. Momentarily, they disappeared and his face seemed a perfect mask of smooth flesh. "You do realize that carrying an illegal weapon is a crime punishable by death?" Taggert straightened his shoulders. "Assaulting or attempting to assault an Imperial agent is a crime punishable by execution," he paused, "on the spot!" Abruptly, he grinned, a pleasant smile crossing his face. "What do you say to the charges, young man?"

"It's not mine," Drake whispered.

Undaunted, Taggert said, "I'll ask again."

"It's not mine!" Drake snapped.

"Kid!" Halbert screamed. Without delay, he was silenced by three stormtroopers, who raised their weapons to his temples.

"My man is lying?" Taggert baited.

"I didn't say that," Drake replied, realizing his situation. "I said the gun wasn't mine."

Overhead, the ceiling plates rattled, dislodging debris. The stormtrooper guarding Drake stepped back and fired a volley into the upper deck.

"Wait, wait, stop!" Halbert screamed, as the other stormtroopers took aim and joined the fire.

Agilely, Drake dodged sparks and molten circuitry that fell to the deck. He was careful to keep his hands on his head, as he pressed himself against the far wall to avoid being burned by blast debris.

"Cease fire!" Taggert demanded, calmly turning his scowling face toward Halbert. "Either you begin explaining what's going on aboard this ship or you'll be joining your young friend on charges of treason and conspiracy to commit acts of treason."

"All right," Halbert reneged. He stared up into the exposed ceiling, wincing at the damage to the ship's components. "Squig, if that's you, get down here now!"

Perplexed, Drake listened and waited. Briefly, a chaotic cloud of chatter erupted from the darkness above the ceiling panels.

"I don't care if you were fixing the air ducts, get down here now, before I decide to space you!" Reaching up to capture the meter-tall collection of rumpled brown robes, Halbert set the Jawa down on the deck plates. Instantly, the creature began chattering at the Imperial officer and the perplexed squad of stormtroopers.

"What is it?" Taggert demanded. He gasped at the repugnant aroma saturating the desert scavenger. "What's it saying?"

Halbert grinned, gaining an edge over the situation. "It's a Jawa and he says your blasters need repairing." He hesitated. "Squig says he can fix them for 300 credits each."

Abruptly, Taggert's mood darkened. He glared at the insipid Jawa, at Halbert, and then at the Coynite being held at gun point by his stormtroopers. "Tell me, Halbert, what makes a man forsake his own kind to live among," he glared at the Coynite, "monsters? Doesn't the company of your own species satisfy you, or is it some perverted urge that keeps you among the inferior varieties of the galaxy?"

Another stormtrooper walked onto the bridge. Saluting, he said, "Sir, the sensory probe sweep is complete. This ship is clear."

Taggert returned the salute. "Very well, prepare the prisoner. We're leaving."

"Prisoner?" Drake coughed. Despite the maturity gained through numerous adventures with his father, he felt the sting of tears. "You can't!"

"Whoa!" Halbert blurted, forgetting his place. "You can't really take a kid in ... on those kinds of charges?"

The Coynite stirred from the wall, mumbling and gesturing toward Drake.

"Right," Halbert laughed nervously. "The kid saw an Imperial Destroyer, stormtroopers, first time in his life. He spooked. That's all. Look at him!"

"I am," Taggert pondered aloud, then he stared at the blaster in his hands. "I suppose ... if I could only make an example ..." He aimed the blaster at Drake, then slowly pivoted until the muzzle faced the Coynite.

Shocked into reaction, Drake lurched for Taggert's hand. "No!" he shouted. One of the stormtroopers also reacted, firing a quick burst. Though he was moving to the side, Drake was not fast enough to escape the bolt, which blistered its way into his right shoulder, charring the flesh and muscle beneath the impact. Driven by the force of the blow, Drake slammed into the corridor wall, feeling a rib give way beneath the stress on his body. He fell to the floor, writhing in agony as the pain washed through him. Alarmed by the scent of scorched flesh, the Jawa bolted, vanishing into an access maintenance tube.

Handing the blaster to his nearest escort, Taggert stepped over Drake's body. "Captain Halbert, by order of the Galactic Empire, as a representative of that order, I declare you are free to go on your way."



The stormtroopers congregated behind him. Hesitating, the Imperial agent paused, turning toward them. "How do you say," his face brightened, showing the first signs of color in his cheeks, "ah, clear skies." Without further comment, the boarding party returned to the rear of the *Seldom Different*, backtracking to their shuttle the docked corridor.

The sounds of the repressurized seal echoed through the corridor.

"Sratt!" Halbert spat. "Reset those coordinates."

The Coynite ignored him, kneeling beside Drake.

"Put the kid in my quarters and get back here," Halbert demanded. "I need you on the bridge." Pointing an angry finger at Drake, he hissed, "You're not going to last in this business, kid. Who told you to get out of the cradle?"

"I was in the turret," Drake said weakly, as Parr'Sratt gently helped him to his feet.

"Hurry up with the brat, Sratt." Halbert stormed onto the bridge, briefly whispering, "I need a drink." He threw open the cabinet and retrieved a bottle of Corellian ale before vanishing into the forward flight compartment.

Parr'Sratt helped Drake into the captain's quarters, settling him into a narrow bunk. The Coynite smoothed the blankets up to the trembling boy's waist and then unzipped the flight jacket to examine the wound. An obvious frown crossed his face. Taking a medpac from the surgical kit, the Coynite gently tapped it against the wound, steadying Drake as the boy winced in pain.

When the intense burning sensation began to subside, Drake felt the Coynite move away from the bunk. He heard water being poured. Though he was not certain, Drake swore he saw Parr'Sratt spit into the cup before reaching into a satchel and sprinkling a strange powder into the steaming water. Faint from the medication, Drake began to drift off.

"Lom," Parr'Sratt whispered. "Lom."

Drake awoke, startled.

The Coynite nodded, pressing the cup to his lips. "Lom," he said with pleasure.

Drake frowned. "Lom?" He stared into the unfamiliar face, feeling unnaturally at ease. "Only two people in the galaxy call me by that name," he paused, "my father and ... and you don't look like Karl Ancher. How?"

"Lom," the Coynite repeated, forcing the youngster to sip from the cup. "Lom'Ka'Sol."

With his face wrinkled in a horrible mask of displeasure, Drake swallowed the hot concoction, surprised to find it similar to the biting edge of Socorran raava. He turned to the Coynite. "Lom'Ka'Sol? What does that mean?"

"It means out of the cradle," Halbert replied from the doorway. "He's probably cussing you out for not listening to me and nearly getting us all killed." The Corellian was already drunk. "Sratt, I can't set the damn astrogation system. Somebody moved the nav computer." Staggering into the corridor, he howled, "Squig, when I get hold of you!"

Gently, Parr'Sratt covered Drake with the blankets. "Lom'Ka'Sol," the Socorran mumbled, drifting into a deep, deep sleep.

"Sratt!" Drake awoke with the Coynite's name on his lips. Glancing about the room, he noted the familiar interior design of an outdated YT-1300 light freighter. "The *Miss Chance*?" His sensitive ears heard the quiet hum of the ion drives, but there was a characteristic hiss that Drake recognized as a modification his father had worked into the engines. He chuckled softly. "It is the *Miss Chance*."

Wincing against the pain and stiff muscles, he pulled himself from the bunk. Drake carefully glanced at the wound beneath his shirt, surprised to discover it was nearly healed, the scar tissue beginning to blend into the surrounding skin. Instinctively making his way to the bridge, Drake paused outside the forward cabin. Smiling, he watched his father toiling over flight readouts, puzzling over galactic charts and astrogation coordinates. The handsome bronze face held a vague familiarity, but it was haunted with worry. Grinning, Drake cleared his throat.

"Drake," Kaine gasped. "What are you doing up?"

"I heard the engines," he replied, using his good arm to embrace his father's neck. Despite the burning sensation of his wound, he felt a warmth that went much deeper, there in the safety of his father's arms. "How long have I been out?"

"Three days."

"Where are we?" Drake asked, stiffly sitting down in the co-pilot's chair.

"In orbit above Tro'Har." Kaine punched up the coordinate plane, visually displaying their location in relation with the nearest celestial bodies.

"In the Elrood Sector? Near the planet Coyn?" Drake probed. "You know that Coynite," he accused, "the one that Badawzi sent with Halbert and me?"

Kaine leaned into the plush upholstery of the acceleration chair. "Parr'Sratt is an old, dear friend of mine." Sighing nostalgically, he added, "He brought you here before heading back to Socorro with that slug Halbert."

"A friend? And he works for Abdi-Badawzi?"

"Abdi amuses Sratt," Kaine laughed. "He gets money, ships, a place to sleep ... just to stand around and glare at people."

Drake hesitated. "What does Lom'Ka'Sol mean?"

Kaine faltered. "Why do you ask?"

Indignantly, Drake replied, "Because you and Ancher have called me Lom, ever since I was a baby, and now some Coynite that I've never seen calls me by that name."

"Is that so unusual?"

"Toob never called me Lom," Drake argued. "Not even Abdi called me Lom."

Sighing, "When Sratt first saw you, he was overcome," Kaine said, his pleasant face darkened by the memory. "It was all he could say. Over and over and over again." Taking a deep breath, he explained, "Lom is the Coynite word for freedom."

"When did he ever see me?"

"When you were born," Kaine answered, nervously pulling at his lower lip. His eyes were dark and distant. "You spent the first few hours of your life in a Coynite warrior's bare hands." Sadly, he whispered, "While I stayed with your mother, until she," Kaine stammered over

the memory, "... until it was over." Blocking out the recollection, he added, "Lom'Ka'Sol literally means freedom from the cradle law or out of the cradle."

"That's what Halbert told me."

"I doubt Halbert knows anything about Coynite tradition or the Cradle Law," Kaine said, "which prohibits male Coynites from owning land, taking a wife, even disobeying their fathers." He leaned forward, ruffling Drake's hair. "That is, until the male Coynite comes of age or comes out of the cradle."

Hesitant, Drake asked, "Have I come of age?"

"Parr'Sratt must think so," Kaine replied. "The Ka'Sol makes it official. In his eyes and the eyes of other Coynites, you are a man, not *tu'pah*, a child."

"What about Chu'la?"

Kaine laughed, his natural charm returning. "When pronounced la'chu, it means little fox. Chu'la means cunning, little fox, the fox who cannot be caught." He smiled, shrugging his shoulders. "It's a pet name Sratt uses for me." Twisting around, he opened a hidden plate on the floor, handing Drake a holster. "Old Toob gave me hell for letting my boy run about town with a sporting blaster."

"Then you know," Drake whispered, thinking about the dying smuggler.

"Yeah," he replied. "You better strap that on, we're about to break orbit."

Admiring the heavy blaster and the custom designed holster, Drake probed, "Strap it on now?"

Kaine toggled the flight switches, boosting power to the ion drive. "We're going back to Socorro."

"What? But, Badawzi ..."

A serious look of concern fell over Kaine's face. "Remember where you come from, Drake. Socorro is your home, by birthright. You carry it here." He tapped the leather pouch at Drake's breast. "Doesn't matter where you set your coordinates. Besides," a coy smirk traveled across his face, "aren't you forgetting something?"

Drake frowned, desperately searching his scattered memory. "Saw Toob. Went to the tavern. Saw Ancher," he whispered. "I didn't pay the docking fee ..."

"Drake!" Kaine laughed playfully. "It's nearly winter. Certain volcanic basements will start filling with underground water and --"

"The *Steadfast*!" Drake cried. "It's still hidden in the Doaba Badlands!"

"Now what do you say about Abdi-Badawzi?"

Determined, Drake strapped his blaster belt around his waist. "Abdi," he grumbled, prepping the astrogation system, "better keep his distance or he might find himself doing business offworld."

Waiting for the hyperdrive cue to wink on, he proudly whispered, "Spoken like a true rogue."